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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem of student retention faced by colleges and universities through the presentation of a university course, the University Life Seminar. The seminar is described as a program designed to help entering students cope with various aspects of the academic environment, specifically human relations, academic decision-making, study skills, career decision-making skills, and experience in time management. A historical background of the course is given and the evolution of the course into a seminar on university living is described. The five course sessions are presented, cost and time investments are discussed, and the course evaluation results are reported. (NRB)

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Teaching Students About Services:

A Course Description

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Over the past several years there has been a proliferation of courses developed at colleges and universities to aid in the retention of students (Sagaria, 1979). Interest in programs such as these has been fueled by a fear of enrollment declines and stiffer competition for qualified students. According to Beal and Noel (1980) the four major problems encountered by those who would like to initiate programs to aid retention are lack of time, lack of data, lack of staff, and lack of funds.

The purpose of this project is to present a course at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, jointly developed by the Departments of Residence Halls and Student Orientation that somewhat addresses these major problems. The course entitled University Life Seminar is felt to be unique in that the course was extremely cost effective, provided opportunity for professional development of university staff members, and provided experiences for students that are thought to be linked to their retention.

Purpose

University Life Seminar was initially designed to reach a "target group" of students who were entering the University with an ACT composite score of below 16 or those students who were on academic probation. Through this course these students were to develop skills to help them cope with various aspects of the academic environment, specifically dealing with human relations, academic decision making, study skills, career decision making skills, and experience in time management. To increase the attractiveness of this class to the students, it was offered in a University residence hall

occupied primarily by freshmen, and it was given for one hour of academic credit through the Department of Educational Psychology.

Historical Background

The course was first offered in the winter of 1979. Students living in Hess Hall, a residence hall at UTK housing a predominantly freshman population, were identified by the orientation department as "high-risk" students and were contacted via a letter which described the course. Approximately 44 students were contacted, of which 15 participated in the first class meeting. Of these 15 students, 14 students successfully completed the course and evaluated the course as having been beneficial to them. During the course of this first offering, the instructors noticed a significant lack of basic writing skills and a seemingly depressed level of interest and lack of motivation to learn from this experience. In an informal follow-up of this first group it was noted that many of these students did not persist into spring quarter of 1979.

For this reason it was felt by the instructors that this offering should be opened to all freshmen in the hall who may be interested in the class. To achieve this goal, advertisements for the class were placed on each floor in addition to the distribution of letters to the "high-risk" students. This tactic resulted in a more diverse group of students who overall appeared to gain more from the class and to contribute a great deal more to its process. The class composition consisted again of about 15 students, and evaluations of the class were positive.

Description

The evolution of this class has broadened to become a seminar on university living. An additional goal of this seminar is to tie together a number of services that exist throughout the campus, relate these services to the topics offered in class, and allow students to pursue whichever developmental direction they choose, to make easier the path, through what hopefully will be four productive years at the University. The most recent offering of the course resulted in classes being held in several different residence halls with a total enrollment of 45 students.

The following is a list of topics chosen for University Life Seminar. The rationale or basis for choosing these topics stems directly from research relating to factors that bear directly on student persistence in a college or university.

Session I - Interpersonal Skills Development

The goal of this first session was to help students become aware of the importance of interpersonal skills development in relation to almost every aspect of University life -- from living with a roommate, to dealing with a professor. During this session students experienced the following activities:

1. An introduction to the course;
2. Exposure to several interactive exercises;
3. A mini-lecture on interpersonal skills;
4. Handouts on appropriate offices that could further assist

in this area, including the counseling center, women's center, orientation department, and residence hall staff.

Session II - Academic Decision Making/Goal-Setting, Career Planning

This second session was designed to increase the student's awareness of the decision-making process and the importance of academic and career goal-setting. During this session programs included the following:

1. A mini-lecture on decision making;
2. Experience in working through decision problems;
3. A mini-lecture on goal-setting followed by an assignment to develop a basic statement of goals, academic or career;
4. Handouts on appropriate offices that could assist in this area including the counseling center, career planning and placement services, and the liberal arts advising center.

Session III - Career Planning and Placement

This session served to familiarize students with services available to them through career planning and placement services and attempted to put them more in touch with their own skills, interests, and abilities. This session specifically included:

1. The Self-Directed Search;
2. Procedure to learn how to relate the career codes in the S.O.S. to materials in the career resource center.

Session IV - Study Skills/Time Management/Note-Taking

The goal of the fourth session was for students to get exposure to different techniques that can help them cope with problems encountered in trying to study including experience in time management, note-taking, and general study skills. During this session students participated in the following:

1. A mini-lecture on time management;
2. Experience in using a "to-do" list;
3. A mini-lecture on note-taking;
4. A mini-lecture on study skills;
5. Handouts on appropriate offices that could assist in this area including the reading center, orientation tutorial services, refresher courses, classes for credit and non-credit, and the counseling center.

Session V - "The Academic Treadmill"

During the final session students had the opportunity to discuss with faculty and students their concerns about the academic environment. This session included the following programs:

1. A group discussion with a university professor;
2. Small group discussion with student orientation assistants with similar majors;
3. Course evaluation;
4. Optional tour of the library.

Cost

The cost of University Life Seminar is minimal. The only real cost that could even be determined were the costs of materials, supplies, and duplicating. Indirect costs resulted from staff time. Course facilitators consisted of full-time, live-in residence hall staff. The primary responsibility of these staff members was to insure that adequate notice for the class was given, that high-risk students in the hall were identified and contacted, and that the individual sessions were well organized. The facilitators were given a two-hour training meeting to review all materials, outline the proper sequence of the sessions, and to coordinate the use of special guest lectures from other offices on campus. Guest lecturers volunteered to assist in the program and represented such offices on campus as career planning and placement, the liberal arts advising center, the library, and various academic offices on campus. The total time invested on the part of the facilitators was no more than 3 hours per week for 6 weeks (2 hours for class, 1 hour preparation), and the total time commitment for guest lecturer was no more than 2 hours for each class visited (usually no more than 2 classes).

Evaluation

A positive spin-off of the University Life Seminar was the opportunity of a diverse group of university personnel to interact on a professional and personal level. Contacts that were made through the initial coordinators of

the course served to open avenues and provide for interactions within the university that had heretofor been non-existent. Although this dimension of the course was not formally evaluated, this sentiment was widely expressed by staff memebers who took part in this project.

The most critical element of the course was, of course, to have a positive impact on those students who participated in it. To use retention as the basis for evaluation would be misleading due to the fact that it would be an extremely difficult task to control for all the factors that have been linked to this problem. According to Beal and Noel (1979) there are certain factors that can be identified as negative characteristics that influence student retention. These factors include inadequate academic advising, inadequate curricular offerings, conflict between class schedule and job, inadequate financial aid, inadequate counseling support systems, inadequate extracurricular offerings. Factors that are positive influences include caring attitude of faculty and staff, high quality of teaching, adequate financial aid, student involvement in campus life, and high quality of advising.

From these factors several general areas were selected for evaluation. These factors were satisfaction with university life, understanding of services offered at the university, and satisfaction with university services. In order to measure these factors and to measure the effect of the course along these various dimensions, a survey instrument was developed and administered, and pre-test design was utilized. The post-test of the group participating in the course was also compared to a control group of high-risk students who did not participate in the class. The results of this evaluation are contained in the following section.

Results

The results of this study indicate that perhaps the greatest value of the University Life Seminar lies in increasing a student's knowledge about services available within the University environment and to a lesser extent, increasing the satisfaction with such services. (See Table 1.)

Insert Table 1 here.

In the general area of overall satisfaction with University life there is no indication that the University Life Seminar had any kind of significant effect.

Discussion

According to Lewis Mayhew (1979), the greatest single factor in keeping students in college "is to contrive ways for almost all students to become directly involved in some significant activity...." Astin (1978) states that universities, as a matter of policy in their general operating concept, should do everything they can to get students "to invest more of their physical and psychic energy in the educational process" and get more involved.

Courses such as the University Life Seminar have the potential for opening such avenues of increased activity to students through helping to familiarize them with the abundance of student services available on campus and bringing those services directly to the students.

This would certainly seem to be a viable, cost-effective, and rewarding experience for student affairs organizations to nourish. Any energy directed to endeavors such as this would be energy well spent in an area that has become a central issue in colleges and universities across the nation.

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Table 1

Evaluation of Factors Affecting Retention Among University Life Seminar Students

Factor	Mean	F Ratio
Satisfaction with University life		
Experimental Group	2.2903	1.280
Control Group	2.4375	
Knowledge of Services Available		
Experimental Group	2.8182	10.775*
Control Group	2.1875	
Satisfaction with University Services		
Experimental Group	2.6970	1.567
Control Group	2.4839	

*Significant at the .01 level